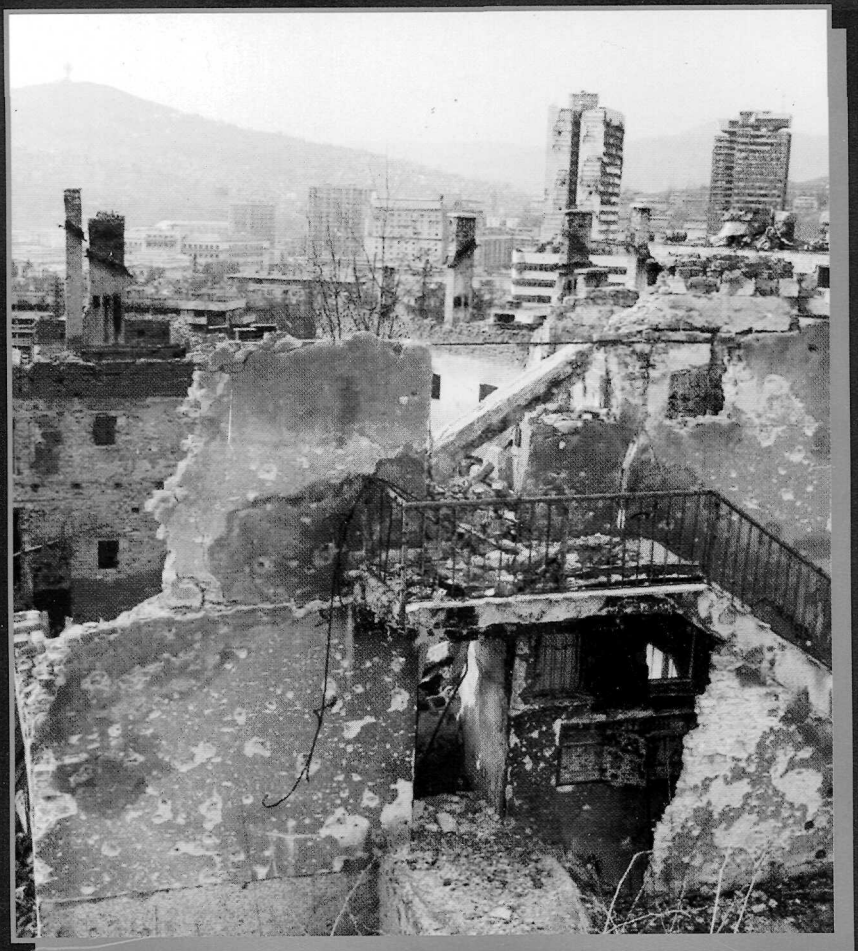
SHARP CORNERS:
URBAN OPERATIONS AT CENTURY'S END

Roger J. Spiller



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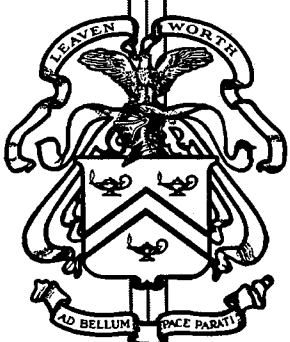

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Introduction

This study was directed by the Commanding General, US Army Training and Doctrine Command, in the summer of 1999. NATO operations against Yugoslavia had just begun. Notwithstanding official announcements that ground forces would not be needed for the time being, expectations ran high that ground troops would ultimately have to be employed. The precise nature of the operations they would be called on to perform could not be foreseen, and consequently neither the size nor the precise character of the forces to be committed could be decided at the time. The range of possibilities was enough to give any commander or operational planner headaches: American ground forces could be engaged in direct combat within or beyond the province of Kosovo, then the focal point of NATO operations, against conventional forces or their surrogates. US troops could also be employed as an element of a peacekeeping operation confined to the province itself, or perhaps beyond, or any gradation of commitment between these extremes. No one with official responsibility could envision a scenario without ground troops of any sort.

Only one assumption could be made with any sort of confidence: once ground forces were introduced, a significant part of their duties would be performed not in the open countryside but in areas that could to some degree be characterized as urban. Some such areas might be very small, no more than a village perhaps, with a population numbering in the tens. Some might be towns with only a few thousand inhabitants. Others might be much larger municipalities, with populations running to the tens of thousands. The question naturally arose: to what degree was the US Army prepared for this mission, ill-defined as it was at that particular time?

Some of these questions have since been answered. NATO's air campaign forced the Yugoslavian Army from Kosovo and opened the way for the deployment of a multinational force to reestablish civic order in that province. NATO ground forces have not been challenged seriously so far. But Kosovo is hardly peaceful. Hatreds, both ancient and recent, threaten the stability of the region for the foreseeable future. It is likely that many of Kosovo's problems will be played out in the villages, towns, and cities of the province, but no one knows how or when these will be resolved. History is yet to have its say.

The deployment of ground forces into Kosovo is only the latest in an ever-growing list of contingency operations conducted by the United

States and other leading nations in recent years. Some commentators have made the dubious claim that this kind of undertaking has become more frequent since the end of the Cold War, but it is more probable that the overriding burdens of the Cold War obscured what was under those circumstances a minor class of military operation. Contingency operations then made a smaller claim on the public's attention, even while they kept America's armed forces gainfully employed. The record shows that the United States conducted more than 250 contingency operations around the world between 1945 and 1976, not including the Korean and Vietnam Wars. In 40 percent of these operations, the US commitment took the form of ground forces, usually in less than division strength. More to the point of this study, however, most of those operations were conducted in urban areas.

So, an argument could easily be made that US armed forces, and the Army in particular, have a considerable body of experience in conducting limited operations in urban areas, some of it very recent indeed. Of the most important American operations since the end of the Vietnam War—Grenada, Beirut, Panama, the Persian Gulf War, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Haiti, Somalia, and now Kosovo—only the Gulf War could be said to have been carried out beyond the confines of an urban area, and even in this case, Kuwait City and the bombing of Baghdad were an important element of the larger campaign.

A collection of operational experiences does not, by itself, guarantee that an army will learn from them, and this returns us to the question of the Army's readiness to undertake the urban missions of the future. These experiences, as well as the experiences of other armies, have contributed to an impressively large body of professional military literature. This literature includes historical case studies, technical and topical studies, studies on the employment of specific weapons and weapons systems, and the tactics to be employed by particular branches both singly and in combination with one another. A comprehensive bibliography of these materials would be several inches thick. If only weight and utility were synonymous.

Such a compilation would contain the US Army's own Field Manual 90-10, *Military Operations in Urbanized Terrain*, last issued in 1979. When I began this study, a revision of FM 90-10 was already under way. The Joint Chiefs of Staff had assigned joint doctrinal proponency for urban operations to the Marine Corps, whose task was to formulate a doctrinal concept that would form the basis for a new Joint manual, for which the Army would serve as the technical review authority. By no

means, then, should the present study be seen as the Army's main effort at coming to terms with the contemporary shape of urban operations.

Given the great variety and scope of these initiatives within and beyond the Army, and the body of knowledge that has been created already, one might well ask why this study is required? What could be left to study?

The answer to these questions lies partly in the guidance for this study. First of all, the intended audience for this paper is the Army as a whole. To a certain degree, the subject of urban warfare has come to be seen, justly or not, as an unwelcome distraction from the real business of an army, a relatively minor class of military problem that can be solved best by the application of time-honored tactical principles or by means of technological superiority. This view implies that not the whole Army, but only certain parts of it, need consider the unique challenges of modern urban conflict in its many forms. Under the circumstances, this approach hardly prepares the Army as a whole for the demands of a military future that promises a continuation of the trend towards urban operations witnessed in the immediate past. Ignoring these demands, or relegating them to small cadres of specialists, is not a viable course of action.

So, first of all, this paper aims at reviving interest in urban conflict and restoring the subject to the place it deserves in any modern army, and most particularly our own.

Another, equally important aspect of the guidance was that this investigation should address the challenge of what has come to be called, rather misleadingly, "the asymmetric threat," by which term is meant adversaries whose capabilities cannot hope to mimic our own. These antagonists harbor intentions and define their successes in ways that differ significantly from those of orthodox armed forces whose strategic and operational values derive from long traditions. The challenge thus posed to modern armed forces has not been adequately addressed.

Behind this guidance lies the suspicion that weaker adversaries in the future would choose as their *preferred* battleground the vast urban agglomerations of the world. In writings on historical and contemporary urban operations, one often sees that armies have long had an aversion to operating in the urban environment. This is an old and well-founded tradition. Unconventional adversaries often have been able to capitalize upon this aversion, but it is by no means certain that the advantage is constantly on their side. No fighting force is ever

permitted to indulge its operational preferences with impunity. War and lesser forms of conflict do not organize themselves for anyone's benefit.

We know that in times past, armies have been defeated as much by their own shortcomings as by the actions of their enemies. These armies were so reluctant to make critical changes in their time-honored habits that they offered their enemies a vulnerability to exploit. A disjuncture between the habits of modern armies and those of their less conventional adversaries may be growing wider, creating a gap so wide that it cannot be bridged even by the most heroic ingenuity. The ability and willingness to envision and then to enact new ways of fighting may be the most dangerous asymmetry of all in the world of modern conflict.

Modern professional soldiers have learned by long and hard trial that war can no longer be thought of merely as an event, fought out without reference to its larger context. The concept of war as a strategic phenomenon with discernible parts we now call campaigns is well fixed in professional military literature. Since the emergence of the operational art in the early 1980s, the US Army's doctrines, tactics, techniques, and procedures have been attuned to this broader conception of war. But, we know, the Army's most recent thinking on urban conflict is represented by an ancient field manual, outdating by several years the principles by which we now conceive, plan, and guide our current operations. The question of how, precisely, urban conflict fits within the operational art is a question still waiting for an answer, and one, it is hoped, to which this study will contribute.

Like Gaul, the study is made of three parts.

The first part is based on the assumption that in order to take a city apart one must first know how to put it together. A substantial literature on urban design, planning, and management has never been exploited in a study of urban warfare, though a flash of common sense would tell us that these subjects are highly interrelated.

The second part attempts to place urban warfare into some perspective. No end of confusion has arisen over the years because of a failure to distinguish what is truly new from what is merely unfamiliar. Aspects of urban life, design, and urban fighting, thought by some observers to be precedent shattering, most often turn out to have been several hundred, if not thousands, of years old. If nothing else, simply knowing that others have faced the same problem has a calming effect, but when those others have found a solution, then the effect is educational.

The last part of this study attempts to fuse what has been discussed in the first two parts and suggests how we might make a fresh start at understanding a very difficult form of war in the future. That there are urban operations, perhaps outright urban war in our future, there is no doubt. The only question is when, and what can we do about it now?

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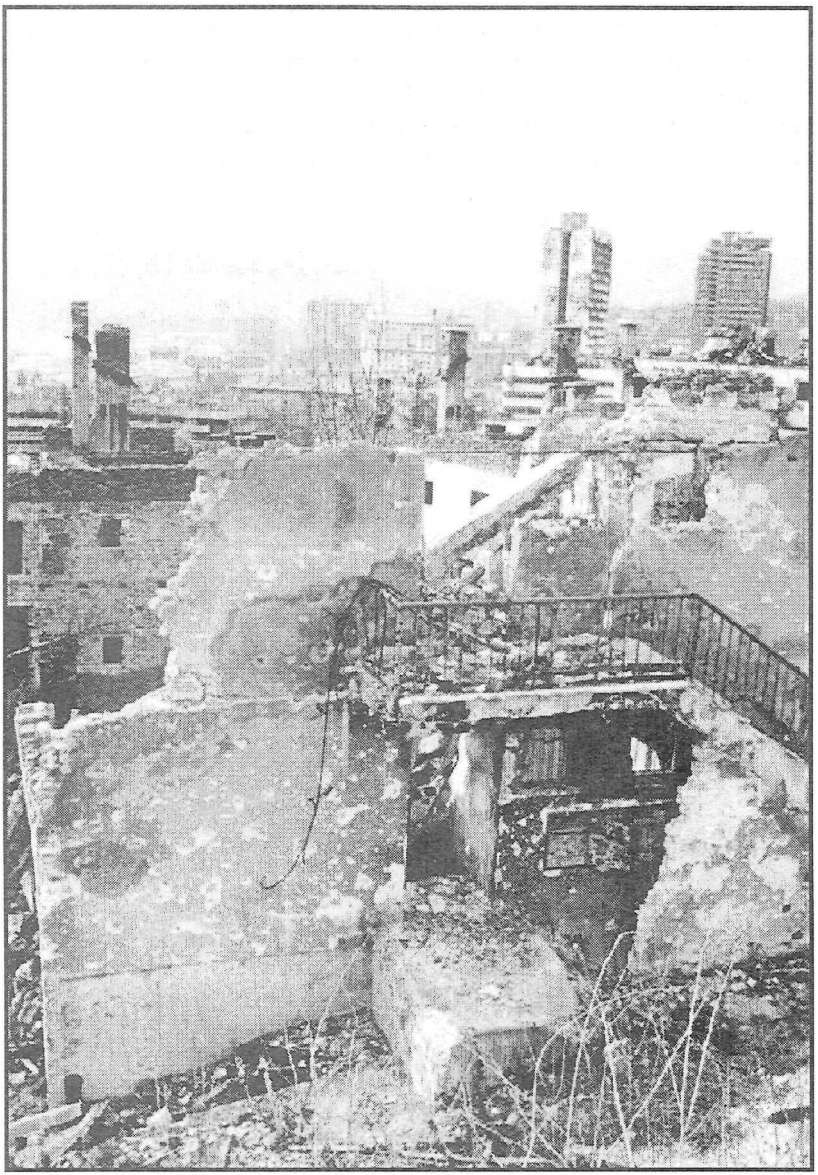

Official photo courtesy Dr. Richard Swain

No operational imagination required. A Sarajevo neighborhood, 1998